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Afghanistan: National Guard members with ‘Task Force Mad Dog’ leave their mark in Afghanistan

By Army 1st Lt. Adam Carrington
U.S. Army

FORWARD OPERATING BASE SHARANA, Afghanistan (8/9/12) - Army Spc. Christopher Taylor stood huddled with other Soldiers in his platoon on the flight line, trying to make himself as small as possible while icy wind from the Chinook’s dual rotary blades blasted over him like the breath of a frost demon.

It was the middle of the night Nov. 28, 2011; the beginning of the coldest winter Afghanistan had seen in the last 15 years.

Four hours earlier, Soldiers from the 1022nd Vertical Construction Company didn’t know they would be going anywhere, let alone moving out in the middle of the night to a small combat outpost most of them had never heard of.

The order had come down; the entire company packed and got ready to move, and now stood shivering on a flight line in freezing temperatures.

Helicopters hovered and landed, barely visible in the darkness but easily identified due to thunderous reports of icy wind and screaming engines. The crew chief for the bird closest to them waved his hand back and forth, signaling them to board the aircraft. “Operation Devil Hammer” had begun.

“All I could think was ‘Where are we going, what is the security, what are the living conditions going to be like?’” Taylor said. “This is what I had always thought the Army would be like, but more time to plan would have been nice.”

In Afghanistan, Regional Command East supports the Afghan government by maintaining stability and freedom of movement along the border with Pakistan. Maintaining critical supply routes and preventing the influx of insurgents from the infamous Pashtu mountains dominated operations on the eastern-most boundaries.

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On the western side of RC-East, away from the border, is Afghanistan's Highway 1, aka "The Ring Route." Built during the Soviet occupation, the Ring Route traverses the entire country in a circular fashion connecting most of Afghanistan's major cities. The stretch of Highway 1 within RC-East links Kabul to Kandahar, key terrain for the sustainment and prosperity of the country as a whole.

In a landlocked nation with no ports and few functioning airfields, control of the road network equals control of the country. Coalition forces know this, the insurgents know this. The battle along Highway 1 speaks for itself.

In order to silence the insurgent network along Highway 1 for good, an additional brigade from the global reaction force was being brought in to attack the insurgent networks and flush the enemy out of their holes. Enter the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, the unit selected for the job.

Known as "Task Force Devil," the 1st BCT was scheduled to arrive in theater just as the final snows of winter were melting. Their mission: run wild along Highway 1 throughout the fighting season, attacking the insurgent networks. Before this could be accomplished, they would need a home.

National Guardsmen from the 578th Engineer Battalion, Task Force Mad Dog, had been in country less than two weeks when this mission was materializing. Originally from Manhattan Beach, Calif., the 578th Engineer Battalion commanded two construction companies, four route clearance companies, and one forward support company.

They were given the daunting task of constructing five combat outposts and expanding three forward operating bases simultaneously. This was to be the largest single construction effort in regional history. TF Devil needed its bases operational when it hit the ground. TF Mad Dog had to execute in the dead of winter, with supply routes closing and aerial operations diminishing.

Operation Devil Hammer, preparing the region for an additional brigade combat team, could not fail.

Initially, TF Mad Dog had two construction companies. The 1022nd Vertical Construction Company from the Louisiana National Guard consisted of carpenters, plumbers and electricians and the 842nd Horizontal Construction Company from the South Dakota National Guard consisted of equipment operators for all varieties of construction equipment.

The sheer magnitude of Operation Devil Hammer required engineer units from all over Afghanistan to descend on the project, all under the command and control of TF Mad Dog.

Before the mission was complete, TF Mad Dog would have tactical control of the 236th Vertical Construction Company from the Texas National Guard, the 661st Horizontal Construction Company from the Illinois National Guard, the 577th Expeditionary Prime Beef Squadron Air Force construction organization and two tactical infrastructure construction teams from the 22nd Naval Construction Regiment.

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The Navy TICTs were comprised of soldiers from the 668th Vertical Construction Company from the Army Reserves out of New York and the 721st Engineer Company from the Army Reserves out of Texas.

During the height of the mission, TF Mad Dog was the largest single engineer battalion task force in Afghanistan.

“Having control of organizations from three separate branches of service was challenging. The Air Force and Navy are organized and structured differently than Army construction units,” said Army Maj. Christopher Angle, TF Mad Dog operations officer. “I found it ironic that the Army is moving away from multipurpose construction companies, which have both vertical and horizontal construction assets, in favor of single function engineer companies. During this mission, we had to break up single function companies and spread them out over each job site in order to complete the projects.”

TF Mad Dog’s greatest asset during the mission was the real-world experience and knowledge inherent in National Guard and Reserve Soldiers. Many of the Soldiers and officers have civilian experience in their trades, making them invaluable in the construction process. Whenever a TF Mad Dog element was brought into the planning process for a construction project, the efficiency of the overall plan would increase and the workload would be reduced due to their construction experience.

Army 1st Lt. Russell Fenton, a construction officer for TF Mad Dog, oversaw construction operations.

“My experience as a construction project manager for the Disneyland Resort helped prepare me for this challenge,” Fenton said. “Having a civil engineering license gave me the tools needed to manage and influence the design process for the entire operation.”

In order to reduce the time on site during a project, vertical construction soldiers worked around the clock on larger bases prefabricating wooden structures to be emplaced on a project site when ground conditions were set. Prefabricating guard towers, footers, and trusses saved huge amounts of time when compared to constructing everything in the often austere conditions of the remote base being erected.

Troop construction in Afghanistan is more challenging than the building in the U.S. There are limited materials and equipment available. The only local material Afghanistan has to offer is dirt for fill and gravel. Soil conditions must be taken into account.

With limited compaction assets, freezing, thawing and unstable soil conditions require stronger building foundations constructed from wood that is largely imported. Design meetings prior to construction helped ensure these conditions were taken into account. By building bases simultaneously, TF Mad Dog quickly shared lessons learned across the battlefield.

By the end of the build, all of the original designs had been modified based on shared information vetted throughout the task force.

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“Engineers quickly became ‘Solutioneers’ by adapting to the lack of construction materials, adverse weather, and time restraints,” said Army Capt. Austin Bird, 236th VCC commander.

One of the greatest challenges for TF Mad Dog was the increasing role of civilian contractors utilized by the military for logistical functions. Base requirements such as fuel points, dining facilities, and maintenance bays are more often than not constructed for a civilian company as opposed to military fuelers, cooks or mechanics.

The requirements for civilian contractors can be complicated and often not presented until a project is well underway. The TF Mad Dog construction section would often have to work directly with the civilian representatives to understand and improve initial designs.

“The battle space owner played a crucial role during the construction process,” said Army 1st Lt. Scott Connor, with the 842nd HCC. “By having the customer on ground with the engineers, many concerns were alleviated during the build. The maneuver commanders have a vision, and it is up to the engineers to ensure their intent is met and projects are completed on time.”

Preparing for these missions required a detailed analysis of weather, terrain and enemy activity from the TF Mad Dog intelligence section. This consisted of looking at routes, terrain and enemy activity in areas that, in some cases, had not been traveled in months.

“Going into some of these missions, we had no idea what the terrain was going to look like,” commented Army 1st Lt. Kristoffer Bachmann, Forward Support Company executive officer. “If we come across a sharp turn or steep hill it can slow the convoy speed or even cause a complete halt.”

Members of the Forward Support Company would often sit with the task force Intelligence Section to learn what kind of improvised explosive devices were used in the area prior to executing a mission. This would help them determine the most effective type of counter-IED asset to incorporate into the movement.

One challenge faced by the engineers of TF Mad Dog was that as engineers, they received a lower priority for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets than their infantry counterparts.

Army 1st Lt. James Wolf, the task force assistant intelligence officer, worked overtime to identify reconnaissance assets that could be leveraged in support of Mad Dog missions. Battalion intelligence analysts would pick through intelligence reports with information gathered from the local population to get a better understanding of the insurgent presence in the area of operations. These skill sets made a huge impact when TF Mad Dog was given the mission of expanding a small, out-of-the-way combat outpost called Giro.

“We burned some midnight oil doing research for this one,” Wolf said. “No one had traveled this road in months and we believed the enemy had a lot of equipment in the area. We were preparing to move a bunch of supplies in support of the construction project. It probably looked like a Black Friday sale to the insurgents in the area.”

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One of the immediate decisions made was to integrate the Afghan National Army engineers to support the massive construction projects. TF Mad Dog realized from the beginning that this was a tremendous opportunity for training and partnering with the ANA.

“When we were tasked with this build, I was initially worried about how we were going to maintain our partnership efforts,” said Army Capt. Joe Lee, TF Mad Dog ANA coordinator. “Then we realized that this was a perfect training opportunity to co-locate an Afghan engineer unit at a priority build site.”

Once the ANA engineer platoon arrived at the build site with their heavy construction equipment, they immediately partnered with TF Mad Dog construction units and got to work. Prior to this construction mission, the ANA soldiers had very little experience on their engineer equipment, mostly due to the lack of fuel and exposure to engineer missions. Now that the ANA engineers had both, they quickly became proficient at operating their equipment and contributed significantly to the build.

Army Sgt. 1st Class Eric Flatmoe, platoon sergeant and ANA trainer from the 842nd HCC said, “In one day we were able to put up 633 linear feet of installation walls, I was impressed, really impressed.”

As the winter snows finally melted and the sound of bull dozers faded into the distance, the 1st BCT, 82nd Airborne Division, finally arrived in theater. They quickly spread out into the numerous bases that TF Mad Dog had constructed for them and brought the fight to the enemy. Their kinetic operations have included airborne insertions, combat patrols and huge finds of enemy weapons and bomb making materials. The enemy emplacement of IEDs along the infamous Ring Route has significantly decreased. Afghanistan’s precious Highway 1 remains intact, supporting the economy and logistical needs of the nation.

All of the construction units that had surged together under TF Mad Dog went back to their respective units. The 578th Engineer Battalion retains the two construction companies they originally commanded. Operation Devil Hammer might be over, but the role of the engineers providing support to the battle space owners still continues. Task Force Mad Dog is with the 1st BCT, 82nd Airborne Division every step of the way.

“Task Force Mad Dog heroically built numerous bases for Task Force Devil in the high-altitude, sub-zero winter,” said Army Maj. Stephen Peterson, operations officer for the Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 1st BCT.

“Like true Sappers, they found solutions to frozen ground and material shortages. They displayed true grit and courage in an area with no U.S. forces and limited coalition forces. They set the conditions for the 1-82 to immediately eliminate the Taliban influence in an area of strategic level of importance, and stayed on to support us with tactical construction missions throughout our efforts,” he said.

The success of Operation Devil Hammer has significantly degraded the insurgent forces ability to operate in the region.

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“Operation Devil Hammer put the enemy on their heels, denied them terrain for offensive operations, and it forced them from an offensive stance to a defensive one,” stated Army Capt. Robert Couture, Task Force Mad Dog intelligence officer.

The fighting is still long from over, but Task Force Mad Dog, consisting of Guard and reserve forces from across the U.S., has left their mark on the battlefield.

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South Dakota Army National Guard Spc. Kyle Griffith of the 842nd Horizontal Construction Company fills barricades at Combat Outpost Giro. Giro was so isolated from the rest of the project sites it had to be resupplied by helicopter. (Courtesy photo)(Released

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